

# INCARCERATION AND BEYOND

## FAMILY REUNIFICATION

### Teacher Notes

1. Love is constant but "needs" and "actions" must change to reflect the love. Love isn't constant but always changing to meet the needs of those we love.
2. Talk about the stresses of separation and ask the class to reflect on the separation. Some good questions are: What has been the hardest part of the separation for you? What have you learned from the separation? What will you do differently? What has your child said or written to you about your absence? How has your child changed since you have been gone?
3. Read and discuss the handout "While You Are Away" attached.
4. Read and discuss the handout "Tips for Reunification" attached.
5. "My Plan for Reunification With My Child Is..." Have each student write their own reunification plan. Title it "My Plan". (Stress that the over-all plan should have specific points for each child.)

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### Handout

#### While You Are Away

1. Call as often as possible (some foster parents have strict rules - try not to interrupt meals). Many short calls are much better than one long call... children have a very short attention span and lose interest easily. Be polite.
2. Write at least once a week! Children who cannot read love pictures with happy faces, trees, sunshine, etc., and maybe a comment like -- "You make me feel happy". Every child loves to get mail!

When you write or call try to:

Ask "open-ended" questions! These are questions that encourage talking. Stay away from the "good boy, bad boy" stuff. Questions like, Who's your best friend?, What did you have for lunch? What's your favorite TV. show? What's your favorite color or kind of ice cream? Do you have a favorite book?

If you always ask a child if they are "being good", they may feel you only love them when they are good. (Remember: you may not like what they do and you may make them stop -- but you always love them!)

3. Relationships are built on trust. Promise only the things that you are sure of -- don't give your child a reason not to trust you. Give yourself time and space before you make promises. Once you are home and you "see how things are going" you are in a much better position to make promises you can keep.
4. Tell the truth! If you want your child (or anyone) to be honest with you then you must do your best to be honest with them. It is better to say nothing than be untruthful.

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### While You Are Away (Continued)

REMEMBER: If you are involved in trying to regain custody of your child, then it is your responsibility to prove your can be a good parent. You must prove you made the effort.

It helps to:

1. Keep a list of dates and times of phone calls. This will show the judge you tried.
2. Write each letter twice (or copy the first one) so you can show the judge the letter. (date all letters)
3. If you do not think your child gets your letters, then send a copy to the social worker.

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Handout: Tips for Reunification

If you have not seen your child in a long time remember:

- a. Young children are taught to be afraid of strangers and if your child does not know you or recognize you then you are a stranger - even though you have the name, "daddy".
- b. Young children are afraid of loud noises. So when you talk, speak softly.
- c. Do not run at a small child - walk slowly into a room and watch the child.
- d. Bend down to the child's level - it's less scary, for the child.
- e. Do not expect your child to come to you, he/she will have to get to know you to trust you. Sit quietly and watch at first.
- f. When bringing gifts sometimes toys are lots of fun, but they don't always get the reaction you hoped for. If you offer a gift, bend down, hold it out and encourage the child to come to you - if this does not work, then set the gift down and move away.
- g. Always remember; presents are given 'with no strings attached'. Don't insist on "love" in exchange. Love comes with time and trust.
- h. Rules are important to children and while you were gone someone else made the rules. Learn the rules and follow them. You are now the intruder into their world. Rules can be changed, but first you need to adjust and give everyone a chance to adjust. Playing by "their" rules first will make the child more secure.
- i. Your children see your absence as abandonment, and they are angry. Your family is angry and you may feel guilty and angry at yourself. FEELINGS AREN'T FACTS! TIME CHANGES FEELINGS.
- j. Guilt is very destructive; if possible learn from an experience, but leave it behind you. Let the pain work to change you, not to control you.

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### Tips for Reunification (Continued)

- k. If you are trying to regain custody of your child, your worker will have some very special rules for you to follow - do the things on that list. You may not "like" the worker and the rules may not seem "fair", however the decision to return your child to you is based on how well you did what you were told to do. It is not important that you "like" the worker, or that she "like you". Getting custody of a child is important.
- l. Your children need your time and your love, not a trip to Disneyland. Do NOT feel guilty if you cannot take them some place special - a day in the park to talk and swing is more important than anything.
- m. If you will be taking the child home in the future, try to make many visits. Taking pictures can help the child remember you; leave pictures with the child. At first your child will need the security of the home he/she is happy with; later, short walks are nice.
- n. Routines give children security so you will want to stick with the established routines in the beginning.
- o. Give yourself credit for small changes - others may miss seeing them but you know how hard you are working.
- p. It's not what you SAY - it's what you DO!
- q. Learn about your community and its resources; make new friends, you're not alone.
- r. Children needs lots of love and support to live through a change in homes - so do you.
- s. Trust takes time. The more you keep your word, the more others will trust you. Give yourself and others time to rebond and rebuild. They want to know the "new you" !